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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the stories of gay and lesbian Catholic elementary school teachers. Through interviews and dialogues at social gatherings, these teachers shared their fears, hopes, and strategies they used in order to be able to truly live in the context of the Catholic elementary school. All of the participants had taught only in Catholic schools for their entire teaching careers. Results indicated that the teachers had come to accept the oppression and were working with the system, as opposed to against the system, to create a more inclusive school environment that truly echoed the gospel message of loving one another. Catholicism was an important factor that influenced their choice to work in Catholic schools. Participants acknowledged that they continually experienced a conflict between their religion and their lifestyle. They did not feel safe to come out to their students, though they acknowledged there would be some benefits to doing so. They did not believe that their administrators would support them if they came out. Participants had at least one confidant who knew explicitly that they were homosexual, and most felt that many of their colleagues knew. They believed that they had to work harder than their heterosexual colleagues and be model teachers so it would be more difficult for the administration to dismiss them. (Contains 18 references.) (SM)

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Stories of Courage and Hope: Gay and Lesbian Catholic Elementary School Teachers

Paper presented at the annual meeting of
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Introduction

"What does a gay person look like? Please tell me because I have never really seen one". This was a question that David, a third grade boy asked a male teacher whom I was observing when he was teaching a lesson on AIDS at a Catholic elementary school in Northern California. I still remember the fear that became visible on the teacher's face as he stood in front of this class, trying hard to think of a quick answer. The entire class was unusually attentive and I knew the students wanted an answer. Was the teacher going to ignore the question and tell them that the question will be answered in the fourth grade? Does he tell the class that he knows exactly what a gay person looks like because they have been looking at one for the past nine months? In the end, this teacher gave David the usual answer that gay people looked just like everyone else.

The incident described above served as a catalyst to my exploration of the lives of gay and lesbian teachers who teach in Catholic elementary schools. When I met with the teacher in the event described above, we spent a great deal of time discussing the conflict he experienced. He confided that he was gay and he very much wanted to answer David's question but was afraid to present an answer that would make others suspect that he was gay.

Since I became interested in the lives of gay and lesbian Catholic elementary school teachers, I have discovered a small group of gay and lesbian Catholic elementary school teachers who have been meeting on a quarterly basis to share their experiences and to provide support for one

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another. The members of this group became the participants in this study. Through this study, these gay and lesbian Catholic elementary school teachers would like to come out of the closet and share their stories. Stories can have a transformative effect on its listeners.

The main purpose of this paper is to give voice to the stories of gay and lesbian Catholic elementary school teachers. Through the interviews these teachers are able to share their fears, their hope, and the strategies that they use in order to be able to truly live, (and not just survive) in the context of the Catholic elementary school. What role does their Catholic faith play in their decision to teach in a Catholic school? How do these gay and lesbian teachers discuss homosexuality when the question arises in their classroom? Why do these teachers continue to work for the Catholic church despite the church hierarchy's view on homosexuality?

Catholic school teachers do not have the same kind of protection that their public school counterparts receive under state laws. Goodman (1996) states "although California has recently enacted a law that prohibits employment discrimination based on sexual orientation, many teachers and administrators feel hesitant to tell the whole truth about our lives" (p. 13). While laws cannot guarantee a safe environment for any gay or lesbian teacher, the lack of legislative protection is one aspect that makes gay and lesbian Catholic teachers unique. In most Catholic elementary school systems, there is no such thing as tenure. Teachers are on a yearly contract and a teacher can face dismissal at the end of the time stipulated in a contract

that states that teachers must live their lives according to the moral teachings of the church. Despite this lack of job-security, many gay and lesbian teachers continue to choose to work in Catholic schools. Thus, it is important to understand the reasons behind their choice to stay in what could be an oppressive system.

Review of Literature

In recent years, much has been written about the lives of gay and lesbian teachers and the impact of their presence on academic settings (Harbeck, 1997; Jennings, 1994; Kissen; 1996; Woog, 1995). These authors reveal that gay and lesbian teachers are dedicated, courageous, and professional people. Many of these teachers continue to service society despite the fear that all their contributions will be forgotten as soon as their sexual orientation is discovered. While there are some teachers who "come out" and are still accepted by their communities, the majority of gay and lesbian teachers must remain in the closet if they wish to continue working in schools. Prejudice and discrimination against homosexuals in schools is often a reflection of the prejudice that exists in society as a whole. Blumenfeld (1992) states, "sexual minorities --lesbian, gay males, bisexuals, and transgender people -- are among the most despised groups in the United States today" (p. 3). The burden of hiding one's sexual orientation is even heavier for gay and lesbian teachers who work in Catholic schools.

Church doctrine on homosexuality can have a tremendous effect on homosexual teachers. Gay and lesbian Catholic school teachers are employees of the Catholic church. These teachers are required to teach using Church doctrine as a guideline. Coleman (1997) states that the Church (as revealed in Pope John Paul II's 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*) sees homosexual activity as wrong because these acts are a violation to human integrity on two counts. First, all Catholics are called to live a life of chastity. Gay and lesbian people who engage in homosexual acts, are not living chaste lives (according to the teaching of the Church) because they are engaging in sexual activity outside of marriage. Secondly, the Church condemns homosexual activity because "it lessens one's respect for another's individuality and need for wholeness and holiness of life" (Coleman, 1997, p. 47). This declaration by the Pope should not been seen as an authorization to persecute homosexual people. In fact, in an earlier document entitled "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons" (1986), the Church calls for tolerance and condemns any act of violence against homosexual people.

Despite a call for increased tolerance and acceptance, the church has not shifted from its position of viewing homosexual acts as immoral. In 1997, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops released the pastoral message entitled "Always our children". The bishops in the United States encourage parents of homosexual children to continue to love their homosexual children. The bishops also encourage church ministers to "welcome

homosexual persons into the faith community, and seek out those on the margins. Avoid stereotyping and condemning. " (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1997, p. 11). Despite the welcoming nature of the pastoral message towards homosexuals, the bishops continue to condemn homosexual activity. "The Church teaches that homogenital behavior is objectively immortal (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1997, p.8). This paper, however, is not the forum to discuss whether or not the teachings of the Church are right or wrong. These points were discussed to provide an explanation of the conditions that gay and lesbian Catholic elementary school teachers face.

Homophobia in the church and in society has a negative impact on all people, not just homosexuals. Oppression of any kind hurts everyone. Blumenfeld (1992) discusses several reasons why homophobia hurts everyone. First, homophobia forces people to compartmentalize their gender roles. They are forced to act either "masculine" or "feminine" based on their sex. This prevents people from being who they are and inhibits their creativity and self-expression. Secondly, homophobia pressures heterosexuals "to treat others badly, action contrary to their basic humanity" (Blumenfeld, 1992, p. 9). Homophobia also prevents heterosexuals from accepting the gifts of sexual minorities. Thirdly, homophobia discourages close relationships between people of the same sex. Most importantly, though, homophobia has led to silence. This silence has prevented society from responding more constructively to the AIDS crisis. Zapulla (1997) shows in her study that

schools even find it more difficult to respond to AIDS because of the moral mission that schools are supposed to carry out. The silence has also led to ignorance and invisibility of homosexuals in the school curriculum. Ignorance has also led to the high suicide rate among homosexual teenagers. Thus, "the price of our ignorance can be fatal" (Goodman, 1996, p. 9). For many young students, "being thought to be homosexual is the 'worst thing' that many of them can imagine" (Prince, 1996, p. 31).

Gay and lesbian teachers often face a conflict between wanting to be authentic role models (who can break the silence of ignorance) and their need to feel safe. "To be a lesbian or gay teacher, in most schools, is to walk a constant line between safety and honesty" (Kissen, 1996, p. 16). Despite the desire to become less invisible, gay and lesbian teachers still do not feel that they can "come out" safely. Homosexual teachers who are open about their sexual orientation, are closely monitored by administrators who want to make sure that these teachers do not sexually harass their students (Goodman, 1996, p. 13). Ironically, Goodman (1996) states, "almost all reported incidents of sexual harassment of students have been perpetuated by heterosexual males" (p. 13). Homosexual teachers also fear becoming a target of physical or verbal harassment and are often accused of wanting to influence their students to become homosexuals. Rowe (1993) encourages society, however, to see efforts to make homosexuals more visible as a tool not for recruitment, but as a tool for enlightening young people. Moreover,

talking about homosexual issues will create a safe place for students who are struggling with issues surrounding their sexual orientation.

Homosexuals teachers often have developed strategies to survive in schools. Griffin (1992) explains that there are four common identity management strategies that homosexual teachers use: passing, covering, being implicitly out, and being explicitly out. *Passing* involves performing or talking about actions and events that would portray homosexual teachers as heterosexual. Thus, homosexual teachers who are passing, often make up stories about spending time with a person of the opposite sex even if, in actuality, the other person were of the same sex. Passing is the most closeted strategy. Homosexual teachers who use *covering* do not lie about their activities. Instead, covering involves omitting information that would lead others to believe they are homosexual. Teachers who are *being implicitly out* are open about their sexual orientation to select colleagues. They know that other people know that they are homosexuals. These teachers have developed a group of friends who they feel they can be honest about their sexual orientation. Teachers who are *being explicitly out* are open about his/her sexual orientation.

Homosexual teachers often pressure themselves to work hard or "fit in" in order to survive in educational settings. Hiding is a common survival strategy. Homosexual teachers also feel the need to work harder than their heterosexual colleagues. Kissen (1996) states that many homosexual teachers "feel they need to be outstanding in order to be seen as equal to their

heterosexual colleagues" (p. 42). Homosexual teachers may also monitor their actions or manner of dressing more than heterosexual teachers because they worry about being identified as homosexual (Kissen, 1996). These self-protection strategies in itself can lead to even more pressure because "the energy teachers spend on hiding is more than a drain on their time, it is a drain on their minds and bodies as well" (Kisssen, 1996, p. 53). Whether or not a homosexual teacher is out, Pekman's (1997) study shows that most homosexual teachers are uncomfortable about having to hide their sexuality. because "gay and lesbian teachers who hide do not present good role models for gay and lesbian students" (p. 194).

Efforts have been made in the last few years to make homosexuals more visible in schools by including homosexual perspectives in the school curriculum. Despite efforts by detractors, picture books portraying families with two fathers or two mothers are being used in some schools. Books such as "Heather Has Two Mommies" by Leslea Newman and Michael Willhoite's "Daddy's Roommate" allow children to see diversity in family structures (Stewig, 1996). Students are also being introduced to gay and lesbian writers in English literature classes. Making the curriculum more inclusive for homosexuals, however, is still a challenge. Prince (1996) notes that most administrators see homosexual issues as best taught in health or sex education classes. Such a view perpetuates the stereotype that sexual activity and the ramifications of such activity should be the prime focu of discussions on homosexual issues.

While society has become more accepting and tolerant of homosexuality, schools continue to remain one of the last places were homosexuals are not safe. Homosexuals, whether the be teachers or students, are harassed and are forced to hide their true selves. The work of creating more inclusive schools is not yet complete. There is still so much that needs to be done.

Method

All the participants in the study have some connection to each other. Some of the participants socialized with each other on a regular basis. The common characteristic of all the participants is their dedication to Catholic education. All the participants have taught only in Catholic schools for their entire teaching career. Two of the participants have been teaching for only three to five years while the other three participants have been teaching in Catholic schools for more than fifteen years. All of the participants have identified themselves as either gay or lesbian. Two of the participants were men while the remaining three were women. To protect the identity of the participants, all names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

The data was collected using individual structured interviews. More data was gathered through dialogues that the participants had with one another at the quarterly social gatherings. Three of the five participants in this study were members of the group. Interviews are an excellent way of allowing participants of a study to describe how they interpret the world they

live in (Kvale, 1996). Through narratives, the participants were able to tell their stories to one another. The method was one of "giving voice". McLaughlin (1997) describes voice as "the discourses available to us for making ourselves understood and listened to, and for defining ourselves as active participants in the world" (p. 91). McLaughlin (1997) further states that this voice does not manifest itself in a vacuum. Voice is influenced by the context in which it is produced. Thus, the stories are analyzed using the context of the Catholic elementary school.

The data was analyzed through what Kvale (1996) terms as *meaning condensation*. Through meaning condensation, "long statements are compressed into briefer statements in which the main sense of what is said is rephrased in a few words" (p. 192). After coding the transcripts, themes where then extracted from the data that was generated.

Findings and Discussion

Homosexual educators who choose to teach in Catholic schools have a unique challenge of being true to themselves while upholding the teachings of the Church. An analysis of the data shows, the Catholic school teachers involved in this study have come to accept the oppression and are working with the system, as opposed to against the system, to create a more inclusive school environment that truly echoes the gospel message of loving one another.

Catholicism and being a gay/lesbian teacher

Catholicism is an important factor that influenced the choice of the participants in this study to work in Catholic schools. All the participants brought up as Catholics and had attended Catholic schools as children. Steve, who has been teaching for two years, says that "I was raised Catholic. Its kind of in me. I can't imagine not being Catholic. At one point in his life, Steve started studying to become a priest. Rose, a participant who has been teaching for more than fifteen years, entered religious life when was very young. When she left religious life, she left education. However, when she chose to go back to teaching, she chose Catholic schools because "the Catholic school was a natural place for me even though, I was now living a gay lifestyle. But, I knew what I wanted to do and all my experience had been with Catholic schools and I didn't really want to teach in public schools". Brett, who has been in Catholic education since 1968, states that his love for the church is the primary reason for his desire to stay in Catholic schools. Brett clarifies however, "I know that we do have some differences especially over the issue of homosexuality, but that does not stop me from being a loyal follower of the church." Liz, who has been in Catholic schools for twenty three years, says that Catholicism is important to her. She says , "I love teaching religion. I know I am a good role model for my students. I have a healthy attitude towards religion". Rose feels that she does not "have to reject the entire church because of their position on homosexuality. I don't have a problem disagreeing with certain tenets of the church and still staying with it. I guess

my devotion is more Christ and the church is just a human instrument, and a human element is certainly fallible."

Catholicism has also had a negative effect on one participant. Steve notes that the teachings of the church made him feel like he was a bad person. Steve says, "I had internalized that I was a bad person and that was why I was afraid to deal with it [being gay]." This negative self-image, led to two suicide attempts. Steve says that accepting being gay was difficult, but his greatest fear was that "I would never know what it would be like to love one special person and be loved".

Despite their strong connection with the Catholic church, the participants of the study acknowledge that they continually experience a conflict between their religion and their lifestyle. Liz acknowledges that "the Catholic church is still very oppressive with the gay and lesbian folks". Rose often feels hypocritical when she is teaching religion classes. Steve acknowledges that it may be a while before the church is more accepting of homosexuals. Mary, who has been teaching for five years, often gets angry with the Catholic church. She says:

> Occasionally I do tap into my anger with the church. Let me give you an example. My administrator expects me to attend a religious service that we have at the school, but I don't take communion. 5% of our students are not Catholic but they are asked to go up to the altar anyway and they are asked to do this [demonstrates action of crossing arms over the chest] as a signal that they don't want to receive the sacrament. And I just feel that this is so coercive to make children do that. I feel sick to my stomach that I am a part of that religion. You know in the name of Christianity, there is all this oppression, suppression, repression.

To minimize the conflicts they feel with the issues of homosexuality and the church, the participants stated that they focus their teaching of religion on the gospel message of loving one another. Liz says that when talking about the issue of homosexuality in a religion class, the tells her students "God made people this way and we should not make any judgments about it." When Steve teaches religion, he says "I try to make my primary message that God loves everyone no matter who you are and no matter what you are. Our religion is not about condemning one another. I know I have gay students so I try to protect them as well."

The participants in the study strive for a balance between their acceptance of the teaching of the church and their homosexual lifestyle. Instead of condemning everything about the church, the participants pull out the positive aspects of the religion so that they are able to encourage their students to be more accepting of differences.

<u>The conflict surrounding coming out and compromising</u>

Revealing one's sexual identity to students, parents, of teachers is something that the homosexual teachers in this study would be discouraged from doing. These teachers acknowledge that coming out would mean losing their jobs. They live in constant fear that someone who is not sympathetic or understanding of homosexual issues will discover their secret. Steve says, "my pastor is so by the book. You know, if he's going to fire someone for being pregnant out of wedlock, I know he'll fire me for being gay." Liz shares

the same sentiments when she says, "You know, after doing this for 23 years of being in Catholic schools, I think it's a part of my life. But they could take it all away from me if they find out I am a lesbian." Rose acknowledges that she is an employee of the Church and knows that "in a sense, I would be breaking my contract by living the homosexual lifestyle. I don't agree with them , but I am the one who is choosing to teach in their school."

The teachers in this study do not feel it is safe to come out to students. When asked whether they would come out to the students, all five participants said they would not. Liz says, "I wouldn't come out to my students. Someone would have to out me. I wouldn't feel comfortable with that, just because they're at such a vulnerable stage of their own development. I think it's very confusing. Probably, if I was in a high school, it would be a very big issue. But I think in elementary school and junior high, it is." The teachers in this study, however, acknowledge that there would be some benefit to coming out. Rose believes the primary benefit of her coming out to students would be "letting the students be aware, letting them knew someone who was gay, someone who hold the values they hold and worship as they do."

Coming out to the parents of the children can be equally scary for the teachers in this study. The teachers feel that the parents would pull their children out of their classrooms if the parents were uncomfortable about having a homosexual teacher work with their child. Many of these teachers acknowledge that the parents of the children in their class probably suspect

that they may be homosexual. The teachers who have been teaching for more than ten years are more comfortable with the parents suspicions about their homosexuality. Liz says that the parents "know pretty much who I am. I think I'm well liked by the parents; I think overall, if somebody outed me, they parents would be very supportive of me because they know me as a person and I am a person of integrity". However, teachers who have been teaching for only a few years do not share the sentiments expressed by Liz. Steve says, "I know that some parents know [that I am gay] and the fact that I am not married has raised eyebrows."

The teachers in the study do not feel that they would be supported by the administration of their school if they came out. They acknowledge that their principals also have some knowledge of their homosexuality and that the principals are tolerant. However, the teachers feel that their principals are tolerant of their homosexuality as long as they do not come out explicitly. Steve says, "my principal probably knows, but she knows she can't get too bent out of shape or she'll end up not hiring anyone. There's no one that can really live up to the ideal Catholic person that the church wants most people to be." Mary realized first hand that her principal knows she is a lesbian, but she just does not want to deal with it. Mary reports once incident where "one of my students called me a dyke in front of the class. I immediately went to the principal and she confronted him about the issue but there was no consequence because he denied it."

Part of the decision to teach in Catholic schools involves compromising. The teachers in the study wish they did not have to hide their sexual orientation. However, the teachers believe that they have a purpose for teaching in Catholic schools. Mary chooses to stay in Catholic schools, because "from the students point of view, I'm providing them with a window that they would not otherwise have". Brett believes that his presence also provides a way for students to understand homosexuality. Brett says, one of his former students told him "you are the first gay person I have ever met, at least the first person who has ever told me that he were gay." The student continues, "if being gay is being like you, then I don't understand what the problem is, you are a good teacher, you taught us a lot, and you have affected my life." Despite having to compromise, these teachers create change one student at a time.

Survival strategies

Being implicitly out was a major strategy that the teachers identified in the study as helpful to their survival in Catholic education. Throughout the interviews, the participants mentioned constantly, that they feel that most people are aware of their homosexuality. A key component in this strategy is these teachers have at least one confidant who knows explicitly that they are homosexual. Steve had an ally who left the school after the end of the academic year. Steve says, "I needed to let someone else at work know who I really was." Brett believes that "most of my staff knows I am gay. No one

asks me about women in my life. As long as I am not shouting from the rooftops about my being gay, nobody says anything and I don't say anything and that just how it goes from day to day."

Like the homosexual teachers cited in the review of literature, the teachers in this study also acknowledge that they have to work harder than their heterosexual colleagues. There is a need for them to be model teachers. They make sure that everything is done perfectly. This strategy makes it more difficult for their administration to dismiss them. Liz says, "oh, they won't get rid of me for being a lesbian. It will be because I missed doing my lesson plan." Brett believes, "gay educators in the church try harder to prove themselves and to prove their worth much more than a person who doesn't have that to overcome."

Creating or finding a supportive community is an essential survival strategy, according to the teachers in this study. Jane says that networking is important. Brett believes that "we must have one another to support." Finding the support group, however, can be difficult. The participants who were part of the support group described earlier in this study, found it difficult to tell other gay teachers of the presence of the group. The group was perceived by the members of the group as a covert operation. In some way, despite their acceptance of their sexual orientation, many of the participants continued to live in fear.

Conclusions

Despite all the problems that these teachers face when they work in their Catholic schools, they all choose to stay. These gay and lesbian educators hope to create change within the institution by staying in the institution. Brett says, "you can never initiate change within the organization unless you *are part of the organization. You know, if I stand outside of the organization and throw stones, I end up just putting up more barriers. But by being within the institution, I think you can create more change."*

For these gay and lesbian educators, , the Catholic school is a familiar place that reminds them of the school where they studied many years before. These teachers show that they are model teachers and teach in the true sprit of the teachings of Jesus Christ. The study reveals that the larger society misses out on the many gifts and talents that these teachers share because their freedom is curtailed. The study reveals that when one group in our society continues to be oppressed, we all lose.

Where do we go from here? The results from this study show that there is a marginalized community within the larger Catholic school community. Catholic schools have always been credited for creating strong community ties. But, are we truly creating a Christian community in the sprit of the teaching of Jesus Christ if some people feel excluded because of their God-given qualities?

All members of the church will need to work together so that Catholic educators can fulfill the essential mission of the church. "Each of us has a

unique role to play in this life-giving mission. Each of us, whether individually or through an institution or organization has been entrusted with specific aspects of the work. If we try to stand alone, our limitations become only too visible. but when we join forces to support one another, we can see clearly that we are building the city of God" (McNamee, 1995, p. 6). *Hopefully, one day society will acknowledge that homosexual teachers have contributed and will continue to contribute to the mission of the church. When that day comes, homosexual teachers will be able to live the wish that* a participant in the study expresses: "I just wish I didn't have to be cautious about my being a lesbian. I just wish I wouldn't have to lie about it. I wish I could participate in the full life of the parish and just be who I am.". In the future, it is my hope that no one will ask the same question that the young student asked in the beginning of this paper. Or, if a homosexual teacher *were asked, "What does a gay person look like? Please tell me because I have never really seen one", he or she will not experience fear in answering the question.*

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